

Waukegan News Sun, January 28, 2005

HIGHWOOD — The recent announcement that the U.S. Navy plans to upgrade its military housing on the North Shore brought a large turnout of civilians and military families to a public hearing of the Illinois Senate Education Committee Thursday night at Oak Terrace Elementary School.

State Sen. Susan Garrett, D-Lake Forest, chaired the hearing which involved a panel of 10 people, including local and state elected officials, a Navy housing representative, and several school board officials from Highland Park, Highwood, North Chicago and Glenview, who would share the impact of the Navy's action.

All expressed concern about striking a proper balance between providing a quality education for both civilian and military children while having the government pay its fair cost in educating a child through impact aid funding.

Navy Capt. Rame Hemstreet, commanding officer of the Midwest Naval Facilities Engineering Command, said the Navy's decision to concentrate its basic training programs and schools at Naval Station Great Lakes required the Navy to invest more than \$1 billion in new on-base facilities. It has created hundreds of new jobs, and brought in more support staff to beef up operations.

Affordable housing is critical, Hemstreet said.

When the federal government decided to close Fort Sheridan in Highwood and Glenview Naval Air Station back in the 1990s, it held back some property and housing facilities to accommodate the anticipated expanded staff at Great Lakes.

The Navy now wishes to upgrade some of this older housing, some dating back to World War II, Hemstreet said.

The Navy plans to utilize new congressional legislation which makes it possible to use a public-private partnership approach. Bids will be opened in March to select a private developer to replace all 330 housing units at Fort Sheridan, and provide 370 units (30 fewer than now) at Glenview.

Nearly all the units at both Glenview and Fort Sheridan will be family units. The largest will be four-plexes. Construction of the new homes would be phased in over several years, Hemstreet said.

Much of the military housing at North Chicago is expected to be converted to bachelor-bachelorette quarters.

Hemstreet said the housing redevelopment at Fort Sheridan will also provide more open park space, particularly along the attractive bluff area which overlooks Lake Michigan.

He said the public-private partnership will operate quite differently from traditional military housing. While the land would remain federally-owned, the new structures would be leased to Navy families. Hence, the structures would be subject to local property taxes and local zoning laws.

The Navy would sell 38 acres of Glenview property and 51 acres of Fort Sheridan property for civilian use.

Hemstreet said he was well aware of the long-standing concern that some local property taxpayers might have in subsidizing a military child's education due to the wide variance in per capita financial support. He said the Department of Defense has no say in the funding formula since this is up to the Department of Education.

Maureen Hager, superintendent of North Shore Elementary School District 112, said an influx of an estimated 400 new military children into her district would require a new school. The district

just a few years ago completely rebuilt its Oak Terrace School in Highwood, and it is now close to capacity, she said.

"Local property taxpayers of District 112 bear 87 percent of the district's funding," she said. She said more than \$23.5 million has been spent on educating military children over the past 10 years. While it cost nearly \$11,000 per capita annually to educate a child, federal impact aid to cover military children only provides \$951.

Reports from the other school superintendents present were similar. Roger Neal, financial officer for North Chicago District 187, said it took years of lobbying by his district to get impact aid to the point where it is today. He said he would be very concerned if there was a drastic change in the mix between military and public school children in District 187.

Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, was not present at the hearing because Congress is in session in Washington. But he issued a statement stating he recently co-introduced legislation in the House which calls for mandating full funding for the federal Impact Aid program.

"Since the needs of our military are growing, it is clear that the time for enacting this bipartisan legislation has come," Kirk indicated.

Most appearing on the panel and throughout the audience agreed.